

The University of Chicago

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE THEORY
OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTION FOR
THE ESTABLISHMENT OF
ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

DECEMBER, 1943

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ALBERT TERRILL RASMUSSEN

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LEIDEN, 1914

GEORGE H. MEAD

I. THE PROBLEM OF ETHICS

When the problem of ethics is analyzed in regard to its proper subject matter and task, it is found to be a normative science, in contrast to the study of morality which merely describes the mores. "Ethics is the organization or criticism of conduct in terms of good, right, or welfare."¹ A survey of present ethical thought shows the highly confused state of current ethics and the collapse and transition of conventional morality, under the cross-fertilization of cultures and the new critical awareness of the mores-basis of convention and morality.

A cursory survey of the major traditional approaches to ethics indicates their chief characteristics and shows the various methods of classifying ethical theories as to type. According to methodological classifications, there are ethics of authority, ethics of intuition, and ethics of empiricism. There are two kinds of approach under intuition: (1) through reason to "a priori" principles and (2) by direct intuitive insight. There are also two approaches under empiricism; simple description and structural analysis.

Another classification divides ethics into the naturalistic and non-naturalistic types. The naturalistic ethics maintains that ethics can be explained in non-ethical terms without remainder. Another well-known classification divides theories into right-centered or deontological, as contrasted to good-centered or teleological. Rightist ethics insists that right or good must be determined without any reference to consequences, whereas teleological ethics makes outcomes normative. Under another classification, subjective ethics, which lodges the norm within the individual, is contrasted to objective ethics, which insists on an external criteria. The distinction between religious and humanistic ethics

¹T. V. Smith, "Ethics," Encyclopedia of Social Science (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1937), V, 602.

revolves around the problem of whether human welfare requires a source of value beyond the individual and a criteria rooted in some kind of universal objectivity. Religious ethics affirms these requirements.

Rationalistic theories, as contrasted to those that are non-rationalistic, makes reason supreme guide in ethics through the establishment of rational principles. Non-reflective theories see rationality as arising in a fallible and limited process of reflection. The most important ethical controversy is found to lie in the clash between either dogmatic absolutist ethics or formal rational ethics, on the one side; and sheer descriptive ethics, which analyzes only what is in order to discover what ought to be, on the other side.

All subjective theories are seen to result in moral anarchy, because they provide no external criteria to the mere whims or wishes of the individual. It becomes impolite to invade any individual's privacy and to question his conduct as to right or wrong. Absolutist ethics whenever specific becomes a casuistry that is involved in the relative mores of particular cultures, and when generalized it becomes formal without any directive content. Formal rationalistic ethics seeks to define ethical terms only in other ethical terms and, therefore, suffers from circularity and inapplicability to ethical situations. This is a priorism, which operates only by self-contained rational logic and self-evidence.

On the other hand, the sheer scientific description of conduct patterns, as operating in various cultures, cannot establish universal rules of conduct, unless it can describe an existent perfect society. Nearly all standard approaches to ethics fail to recognize the dynamic structure of human life, culture, and history and attempt to impose fixed standards on dynamic existence. Only a norm in terms of a consistent structure of readjustment and transformation can be progressively relevant to unforeseen unique situations, holding emergent possibilities. The imperative factor of relevancy requires the concomitant factor of relativity. It is usually held that relativity in an ethical norm negates its universality and objectivity. The only way to escape this dilemma is to find a norm that can be relative and applicable to all possible unpredictable situations, yet that can

be universal and objective. It is the hypothesis of this study that such a formulation is possible, and that the universal and creative structure of symbolic interaction meets this requirement. It can be progressively applicable, because it is continuously reintegrative of new perspectives; but is objective and constant, because always operating by a consistent pattern in structuring a perspective-centered existence.

In methodology authoritarianism and rational speculation are seen to afford no escape from custom-bound, culturally-determined casuistry or speculation. Nor can the sheer description of how men have acted, solve the dilemma. Only the empirical method, used in structural analysis to discover the generic process that creates value and human self-consciousness with its powers of appreciation, can be competent to discover universal ethical principles.

It is maintained that symbolic interaction as criteria of ethical conduct has the following attributes. It is:

1. Universal: non-relative to particular man or particular cultures.
2. Existential--objective: non-subjective or non-individualistic.
3. Empirically verifiable: non-intuitive.
4. Creative or processive: not static.
5. Generative of ought and right.
6. The structure of all value--the good.
7. Sovereign over individuals and particular cultures.
8. Superhuman and non-anthropomorphic in status.

In regard to traditional classifications of types of ethical theory, the interactional theory is:

1. Empirical in methodology.
2. Descriptive; not by simple description of fact, but by structural analysis of the observable value process.
3. Semi-teleological; directive not toward specific predictable goals but toward value as processive.
4. Non-hedonistic either in terms of egoistic hedonism or universal hedonism (utilitarianism).
5. Naturalistic; not dependent on circularity of definition in other ethical terms, but definable in non-ethical terms of symbolic interaction.

6. Non-rationalistic: It emphasizes reasoning as function inside of activity and denies reason as a direct instrument to the good.

7. Semi-reflective: It depends on empiricism to isolate value process and to promote interactional value. Reflection, also, provides a limited self-conscious initiative toward value generation.

8. Good or value-centered, but co-ordinative of virtue, goodness, and rightness under a common grounding.

9. Objective yet relative: Non-individualistic or cultural; grounded in interactional value process, yet relative to any moral situation that can arise.

10. Super-humanistic: Grounded in super-individual, super-cultural value process and functional through the "interactional grace" of interresponsive love.

11. Religious because it is an ethic of basic orientation in commitment to and participation in a universal creative fellowship of love and expectancy. It takes the Christian view of God as love, and thus Universal Creative Love becomes the sovereign guide of all human conduct.

II. A GENERAL ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

"Symbolic interaction" is the term used in contemporary social psychology to designate the process of dynamic interpersonal structure in which mind, self-consciousness, and moral discernment are seen to develop. Symbolic interaction is viewed as the crucial and determining factor in producing human beings as a distinct type of being above the other primates. It may be defined as that reciprocal process between individuals and groups whereby the same designations, attitudes, and emotions are invoked in the self as in others, through common signs, so that a common response is called forth in all.

Out of an interactional biological matrix arises gestural interaction which enters the symbolic level through "role-taking" and the symbolic objectification of the self. Only as the individual develops a "generalized other" does he consolidate his multiple roles and become an integrated personality.

The interactional theory avoids both the extremes of a com-

pletely coercive cultural determinism and of a naked, isolated individualism. Society and individuals are regarded as "collective and distributive aspects of the same thing,"¹ as embodiments of a creative interactional process. The world of objects is not rigid and ready-made, but is carved into units which are endowed with meanings by means of symbolic designations and the rich store of symbolically mediated past and imaginative experiences. Therefore, the world of designations and meanings is built up through inter-identificational sharing and responding.

Mind is seen as arising inside of activity. This approach is called symbolic functionalism,² and is integral to the interactional view. Mind operates as covert activity and incorporates a rich area of inner life of memories and anticipations. It is no mere mechanism of response to external stimuli, nor is it a substantive mind, incorporating some extrinsic psychic substance that comes from outside the dynamics of experienceable and processive life.

Through self-objectification in the generalized other, the individual is able to react to himself and to direct his own activity selectively and not as a mere automatic response.³ Through the two phases of the self, the "me" which is the objectified phase as viewed, and the "I" which does the viewing, the structure is developed through which the individual may "transcend himself." The degree of this transcendence depends on the extensity and intensity of the structure of sympathetic interaction which the individual incorporates.

III. HUMAN NATURE AND PERSONAL ORGANIZATION

Both mind, as function of selection and awareness, and personality, as the configuration of personal traits and attitudes, are structured by symbolic interaction. Human nature is not to be

¹Charles H. Cooley, Human Nature and the Social Order (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), p. 2.

²C. W. Morris, Six Theories of Mind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932), p. 297.

³George Herbert Mead, Mind, Self and Society, ed. C. W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

found in any common set of inherited biological propensities, but in the universal, interactional primary-group structure in which all human beings arise. Because of the universal constancy of this structure, all human beings develop the basic traits and sentiments that sympathetic primary relationships produce. Attitudes and the dominance of particular traits may vary greatly in relation to the customs and specializations of varied cultures, but the basic character of interactional human nurture endows all normal human beings with powers of reflection and sympathetic role-taking, or inter-identification, and a set of primary human traits.

The structure of character is important in the problem of ethics, because it predisposes the individual to view conduct from particular perspectives and formulates his interests and goals along habituated channels. Good character is found to be adjustive character which incorporates and expands the fullest possible context of inter-supporting relationships. Rigid character is hampered in constant readaptation in new inter-personal contexts by its dogmatic traits and habit fixations. The type of character necessary in creative ethics is one which has a stable organization, but, at the same time, is being constantly reoriented and reintegrated. Participation in the constantly transforming interactional process makes this possible. This solves the dilemma of rigid unadjustive stability of character as over against flexible chaos.

Drawing on the rich literature in the field of personal organization and disorganization, it is found that only in a career of intensive, extensive, and unskewed interaction, especially through early childhood, can unskewed and flexible, yet progressively reintegrative personality be developed. An analysis of several types of personal disorganization and breakdown have confirmed this hypothesis. A definition of good character has been shown to require value considerations: Good character is that organization of personality which incorporates and participates in the widest range of value.

IV. THE PROBLEM OF REALITY AND KNOWLEDGE IN ETHICS

Since formalism has enjoyed such a long tradition of authority in ethics, and, also, since symbolic interaction carries

an intrinsic vow of validation and knowledge, it has seemed imperative to discuss the problem of knowledge in relation to ethics. We hold the social character of objects, as symbolically mediated by social symbols, and the doctrine of the relativity of perspectives. Each context defines and structures the world in which it originates. Internality of relations as actually effecting and modifying objects is held as opposed to the theory of externality of relations. Contextual organization or connections compose the determinative nature of things. Thus process becomes substantive, rather than objects, and events or acts form the primary units of reality. Emergent perspectives change the character of the world, and perspectives that are transformed to incorporate larger coordinate systems enlarge the perspectivistic context of the world.

A situation may be translated into a wider context through what Mead calls "transformation," by way of role-taking. Through inter-identification, the individual may get over into the other perspectives and make a new synthesis. Translation of an event into other systems is accomplished by "passing from one perspective over into another by symbolizing the viewpoint of both perspectives."¹ Therefore, symbolic interaction is that transformational process which constantly builds up new perspectives into synthetic contexts. It is what Professor Morris calls the "process which stratifies nature."²

In conclusion, it is held that process can be the only universal and substantive invariant, and, further, that the process of symbolic interaction is such a universal structuring process. This process is not mere continuity: It involves definite structure, and is that which is uniform in transformational interaction. The assertion seems clearly warranted that the substantive invariant which is common to all events, but which is not arbitrary nor dependent upon any static point, increment, or particular interaction of perspectives, is the creative order of symbolic interaction.

Thus symbolic interaction is generatively determinative of both the organization of the human individual, the frame of the

¹George Herbert Mead, The Philosophy of the Act, ed. C. W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), p. 49.

²Morris, Introduction to Mead, The Philosophy of the Act, p. liv.

world in which he lives, and, as we shall see, the contextual structure of value. Its invariance is functional and creative, consisting of the kind of reciprocal inter-identificational activity which is built up in shared and meaningful response and expression. Its existential status is not abstract, formal, or subsistentia, but is observably operative and must be validated empirically.

Warranted knowledge can be established only through prediction and denouement, and requires activity. The social generation and relativity of knowledge as presented in the researches of the sociology of knowledge is considered valid. In order to maintain its relevance, knowledge must be constantly transformed, so that it has applicability to new co-ordinate systems. Self-evidence, which is another name for common sense, is incompetent in the validation of ethical norms, because it is rooted in the accepted ideology of a particular culture. Only the transformational process itself, which builds up perspectives and meanings in all cultures, can be universal and normative.

In regard to valid ethical principles, it is concluded that propositional principles in the usual formal sense have little, if any, normative capacity. Mere maxims by which to formally test verbal judgments do not give direction to the total life pursuit of the value-rich career. Not rational judgment but basic orientation and participation in the transformative, reciprocal interaction must offer the basic clue for ethical living. Even in reflective choice among alternatives, interest-bound goals as ends-in-view must be selected on the basis of that which extends the supporting context of interrelational connections and not on the basis of a criticism of sheer satisfaction of desire for particular objects. For both predicted satisfactions and objects are changed in the process.

As a maxim the interaction ethics presents the proposition: So act in every occasion of choice as to extend and intensify symbolic interaction. But it goes beyond this limited device of reminder and emphasizes a participative method to value which lies even beyond predictional range. In fact, it makes the existential value process itself normative, not just as a rational measuring rod, but as an unpredictable creator of value.

V. THE ETHICS OF THE RIGHT

After a rather extensive analysis of both the axiological and virtue-centered types of the ethics of the right, it is found that such an approach offers no criteria whatsoever of appraisal because consequence considerations are intrinsically denied. Prediction is impossible and all verification except self-evidence is sacrificed. Therefore, functional mind has only the ideological generalization relative to the particular social environment to elevate to ethical sovereignty, without any basis for criticism. The "mores" is king.

Right is viewed as arising in the internalizations of parental and social expectancies. Operating first as external commands, these are later incorporated into the generalized other and operate from an inner or voluntary locus. Such a mechanism, then, becomes conscience and issues seemingly categorical commands to the self, but their categorical nature lies only in their status of unchallenged acceptance. There is no method of distinguishing the good conscience from the false conscience. When only the enlightened conscience is seen as authoritative, value considerations are introduced; for the only method of determining the enlightened conscience is in terms of its consequential activity.

Therefore, sheer conscience in itself can provide no criteria for morality. It is an essential moral mechanism for placing demands on the self, but it has no intrinsic content except incorporated social perspectives. It must be constantly transformed and reintegrated, or it becomes dogmatic and value negating.

In the same way, the will is not a separate mechanism, but exerts the motivation of an active organism pressing toward interest goals. Four types of will are discussed: (1) will as practical reason, (2) will as dynamic motivation, (3) will as intention, and (4) will as total organization of personality. Only the last view of the will seems consistent with the interactional view. Conscience is not a separate mechanism, but represents the whole configuration of propensities and interests of the individual. Pure will without any interests whatsoever becomes impossible, and "right," unadulterated by any ends-in-view, can find no seat in such a locus. It is concluded that right represents the ability

to accept responsibility in the form of conscience, which functions by socialized commands imposed upon the self either externally or internally. Only because of this is man a moral creature. However, without reference to value, the content of right cannot be appraised. Thus value assumes primacy.

VI. VALUE AS BASIC CRITERION FOR ETHICS

The prior treatment, at this point, has thrown the burden of the problem of ethics upon the side of value. Therefore, a presentation of the meaning and operation of value becomes a fundamental responsibility. The traditional formulation of this problem, in terms of formal or substantive goodness, is completely unsatisfactory to the interactional doctrine. The "elegant pawn of final end of human living" is without meaning to a theory that sees existence as essentially a flowering process. Goodness must be treated in terms of value, arising in constant and cumulative generation.

An analysis of both objective and subjective theories of value indicates a necessary element but an important inadequacy in each. Values do not reside in objects in complete separation from human interests and meanings, nor are they sheer subjective desires without relation to the externals of existence. Yet both interests and external contexts are essential ingredients in value. In conformity with the notion that both internal interests and external reality are perspectivistically structured in a common interactional process, value is seen to reside only in a contextual framework built up in this interaction.

Particular values found in one particular context must be contrasted to value process which constantly reorganizes new perspectives and brings new unpredictable value contexts. Particular values are value-advantages, whereas constant generic value resides in the organizing process of symbolic interaction, which is termed "value process." It is because of the essential rootage of value in this objective process that value is genuinely objective and not dependent on inner whims or desires. Even desires have structure only because they are patterned in this same objective process. It has already been indicated that this process is operational and empirically describable.

The interactional theory, also, effectively closes the traditional gap between moral value and aesthetic value. These represent two dimensions of the same process. Moral value focuses on contextual possibilities, but aesthetic value emphasizes immediate richness or horizontal spread. Moral value involves future possible aesthetic value, and aesthetic value as having consequences involves moral value.

A summary of value under symbolic interaction:

1. Values as specific are situational and not permanent, and, thus, in segmental form, are contextual advantages or value-carriers.

2. The only enduring value which escapes this advantage or relativistic form is the enduring value process of symbolic interaction, which is creative of all immediate value.

3. It alone offers a base line for value appraisal and for creative choice. It alone is constant in all situations.

4. The degree of its operation determines the degree of value in the unpredictable unique situations, both present and future.

5. Mere advantage-value goals or ends may prove to be disvaluable in a new context, since all specific value units are relative to a specific contextual frame.

6. Value prediction and voluntary cultivation are possible, therefore, not in terms of advantage-value goals but in terms of value process.

7. Symbolic interaction provides a formulation of value which emphasizes full, immediate participation in the qualitative situation, and, at the same time, develops the same anticipatory attitude toward new previously unknown value advantages.

8. At the same time, value is here viewed in such a way that empirical and predictional scientific tests can be used as the only reliable validation method. The proposition that symbolic interaction produces value to the degree of its operational extensity and intensity does not rest upon logical self-evidence, but upon observable and predictable researches. Whether particular types of activity reduce or extend value structure can be known only through operational tests and experiential outcomes. A study of the dynamic structure of human interaction gives the clue both to the manner of its operation and its possible extension.

9. Although symbolic interaction can be cultivated and tested by the human individual, it is not created by him but exists beyond and above him as his creator and nurturer.

10. Therefore, value process can be defined as the reciprocal process of continuous sharing and reintegration of individual perspectives through symbolically mediated inter-responsive activity. Another way to express this is that value arises through the process of inter-evaluation or appreciable inter-adjustive responding.

VII. MORAL VALUE

It is held that moral value is not a particular kind of value that escapes relativity: It is developed in contextual structure and is generically the same as all other value. Moral value as value viewed from the moral standpoint has four attributes: (1) it is developed primarily in selective human choice, (2) it is value in reference to ideal possibility, (3) it is that type of value that is creative in the development of a more inclusive system of other value, and (4) it is particularly dependent on interactional synthesis by virtue of its emphasis upon future possibility.

There are five instruments or techniques for the cultivation of moral value:

1. Conscience must be operationally described. It operates as a minimum conserving instrument of speaking back upon the self. When the conscience becomes sympathetic-centered (sympathy is an element in conscience), rather than definition-centered, it becomes a creative instrument to moral value, but only as progressively transformed.

2. Intuition operates as a method of perspectivistic synthesis or fusion in recombining elements into contextual wholes. It is what Gordon Allport calls "unified structuration."¹ It involves devotional commitment and expectancy, but affords no extra-empirical method to knowledge. It carries no self-validation, but requires transformational procedures.

¹Gordon Allport, Personality, A Psychological Interpretation (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1937), p. 547.

3. Reflective thought is viewed as a dependent and limited instrument of value cultivation. It operates as functional in the direction of activities toward goals. Since predictional goals are not reliable guides to emergent values, it is limited. Mind itself must be constantly transformed and replenished in interaction. Such a mind, then, becomes what Harry Overstreet calls "the intercreational mind."¹ But it can act only toward fixed ideals which reduce expectancy to conformity with old patterns of possibility. Where specific alternatives must be chosen, full perspectivistic synthesis must precede reflective selection, and, in the chain of further decisions interactional transformation must prepare the way for reflection in each step.

4. Sympathy, as defined by the symbolic interactionists, is a fundamental instrument in cultivating moral value. It is not a sheer sentiment, but is the psychological instrument by which the individual projects himself over into the perspectives of others, and views himself from their vantage point. It is the key instrument in perspectivistic synthesis and transformation. It is the technique of operational love and may be defined as creative love. Thus it is by the sympathetic process that symbolic interaction builds up the context of values and meanings. The possibility of an actual operational ethics of love hinges on the intensity and range of sympathetic inter-identification. It operates by appreciation rather than by the forced discipline of formal regulations. This is the reason why a world moved by sympathy is a more moral world than one moved by duty.

5. The last technique to moral value is crucial and is actually inclusive of all others. This is basic orientation to creative community. It holds primacy over the others, because only in constant participation in a creative community of interaction can conscience, intuition, power of reflective thought, and sympathy be readapted into relevance to the stream of new contextual situations and be kept sensitive and expectant. Full commitment to this process of reciprocal interplay means to subject one's character, conceptual patterns, and ideals to constant reintegration and transformation.

¹Harry Overstreet, About Ourselves (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1927), p. 266.

By basic orientation a range of unpredictable value is chosen which cannot be ideologically foreseen. It is to choose devotion to full participation in the creative process that generates all value and builds up and transforms character. It is primarily an ethics of orientation, rather than reflective choice. It does not destroy the necessity of reflective choice in situations presenting alternatives, but it subjects reflection to a higher requirement and warns it of its limited capacity. It requires that its criteria be not ideological goals but a promotion of this structure of reciprocal interplay.

VIII. THE RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF INTERACTIONAL ETHICS

It is because of the crucial character of basic commitment that the interactional ethics is essentially religious. Its religiousness is not a super-added character, but is the intrinsic mode of its operation and its norm. It makes this dynamic process that transcends individuals and cultures sovereign guide in ethics. It is discovered that a religious ethics requires the following elements:

1. It insists that value and righteousness be grounded in a "power not ourselves that makes for righteousness."
2. It emphasized grace, or extra-human means, as necessary in order to gain the insight and the character essential to the richest qualities of living.
3. It insists that man's rationality is insufficient alone to determine the good life, and that revelation is necessary.
4. It demands the attitude of dependency and humility.
5. It maintains that value and righteousness have an enduring, universal, and objective status in contrast to an order of value that is evanescent and undependable.

The interactional theory of ethics concurs in accepting all of these fundamental requirements. It is grounded in a substantive, universal, and transcendent process which generates the total order of human value and the appreciative consciousness necessary to incorporate that value. Both mind and character are created and transformed by a grace not of ourselves. It requires constant progressive revelation under unpredictable creative synthesis in perspectivistic transformation. Pride of intellect and

elevation of rational powers to final ideological authority are its foremost denials. Humility and devotional expectancy are its essentials. And by its universal, creative, and dynamic structure, it presents the one dependable and universal structure of value.

Essential religion, therefore, is universal interactive fellowship--a communion of men committed to the highest reality and to the creative order of value. This is not a mere fellowship for sociability, special interests, particular ideals, or personal rewards, but a fellowship devoted to the reciprocal promotion of creative love, through the practice of symbolic interaction. Symbolic interaction can best be defined as universal creative love.

If the belief that "God is love" be taken seriously, love becomes creator, sustainer, and revealer of the flowering order of value and its definitive criterion of righteousness. God is, then, that order of creative love. Fellowship, not as superficial sociability, but as a deep and primal order of sympathetic interaction, becomes the essential requirement of religion and its basic commitment. This takes the place of that "contentious pawn of dogmatic right-belief" which has been the divisive disorganizer of creative religious community through the centuries, whenever it has been elevated to primacy.

IX. CONCLUSION

Since the interactional ethics is not an approach based on formal rationalism, it does not present a formal proposition as final goal of ethical theory and close its books with the satisfaction of achievement. For whatever limited value such imperatives are worth, it contains such an imperative: So act in every choice so as to promote, intensify, and extend the creative order of symbolic interaction. But one cannot so act by taking objective thought in a crisis, without a full orientation to interactional love and a readiness for transformation in every ethical situation.

The predispositions of character and the stored concepts of mind must first be reintegrated and transformed in full relevance to creative possibility. Therefore, the essential principle derived in this study is presented in the sovereign ethical requirement of full and constant participation in creative, symbolic

interaction. This processive order is objective, dynamic, creative, universal, super-individual, super-cultural, and ethically normative.

